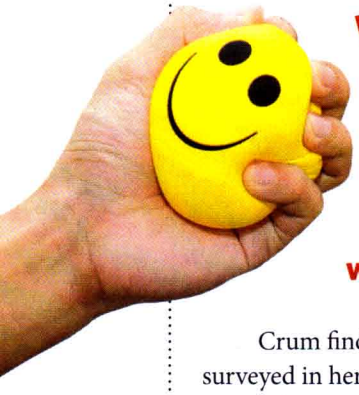
by Mark Katz, PhD

The ReThinkStress Program

NO DOUBT, stress can have negative consequences on our health, our productivity, and our emotional well-being. But according to Stanford psychologist Alia Crum, PhD, research also shows that stress can potentially have positive effects in these areas as well—if, that is, we can change our mindset about the very nature of stress.

Our stress mindset, according to Crum, determines whether we view the consequences of stress as either debilitating or enhancing. Those of us who view stress as debilitating believe that stress is harmful to our health, productivity, and well-being, and should be avoided or managed whenever possible. In contrast, those of us who view stress as enhancing view stressful experiences as opportunities to improve our health, productivity, and well-being.



When we learn to see stress as potentially helpful rather than inevitably harmful, a number of benefits to our health, our productivity, and well-being will accrue.

Crum finds that roughly 85 percent of the people surveyed in her studies view stress as more debilitating than enhancing. This should come as no surprise, since for years leading healthcare experts have been warning us of the many harmful outcomes associated with stress. But, says Crum, there's also a body of research showing the ways that stress can improve our lives. And she feels we've paid far too little attention to these studies. She strongly believes that this needs to change.

We need to appreciate that we have a choice as to our stress mindset. We can choose to see stress as enhancing rather than debilitating. And Crum's studies show that when we learn to see stress as potentially helpful rather than inevitably harmful, a number of benefits to our health, our productivity, and well-being will accrue.

How, then, can we transform a stress-is-debilitating mindset into a stress-is-enhancing mindset? And in the process, how can we begin enjoying the potential benefits derived from exposure to inevitably stressful events and experiences? Crum says one place to start is by going through her ReThink Stress Program. Using a series of short, informative videos, along with corresponding workbook activities and reflection sheets, the free online course teaches a three-step process that Crum and colleagues successfully used to help individuals learn to see stress as helpful rather than harmful. The three steps are: Acknowledge Stress, Welcome Stress, and Utilize Stress.

Step 1: Acknowledge Stress

Brain imaging studies show that by acknowledging and emotionally labeling stressful experiences we increase brain activity in the prefrontal cortex and decrease brain activity in the limbic region. What this means on a behavioral level is that we're now accessing brain regions associated with more conscious deliberate thought rather than regions associated with more reactive fight or flight responses.

We also learn in step 1 that avoiding stress can actually increase stress. Consider, for example, studies that show what often happens when trying to not think about a specific thought (for example, *"Don't think of a gray elephant"*). Studies involving thought suppression (referred to in the research literature as "ironic processing") show how this can actually backfire, since our brain may now be checking in to see if we're not thinking of a gray elephant. We thought we were decreasing our cognitive load by not thinking the thought when in actuality we were increasing it. Simply by acknowledging stress we relieve our brain of this added amount of work, or cognitive load.

During step 1, participants are also asked to identify specific ways that stressful experiences are expressed emotionally (increased anger, sadness, frustration), behaviorally (becoming argumentative, withdrawing, engaging in distraction such as surfing the internet or texting friends), and physiologically (losing sleep, becoming physically ill, growing increasingly fatigued). Participants return to this exercise during step 3.

Step 2: Welcome Stress

Research shows that the things we find most meaningful in life are usually also things that we associate with stressful experiences. Embedded in every stressful experience, Crum observes, is something important and meaningful to us. The key is to find what that something is, which we learn to do in step 2. We also learn that by welcoming

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stress, we can actually increase rather than decrease the amount of energy we have to focus on its source.

Step 3: Utilize Stress

Here, participants learn three strategies for executing new stress responses, both routinely and in the heat of moment: anchors, triggers, and training reviews. Anchors are daily experiences (starting our car in the morning, turning on our computer, etc.) that serve as reminders to mentally rehearse our three steps. Listing the three steps on post-it notes can work as well, as long as they're located in places that allow us to view them daily. By mentally rehearsing the three steps whenever we get into our car, turn on our computer, etc. we'll eventually be able to execute them naturally.

Triggers represent our unique emotional, behavioral, or physiological responses to stress (as described in step 1). In step 3, we make a personal commitment to use the three steps whenever experiencing a trigger. Training reviews require that participants walk through key program components weekly for the next month, then monthly thereafter. This includes repeated viewing of the short, stress-is-enhancing mindset videos.

The paradox of stress

Participants in the ReThinkStress Program learn firsthand about the paradox of stress; how a number of studies illustrate the potentially damaging effects of stress, and how a number of other, less known, but no less scientific studies illustrate the enhancing properties of stress. Participants also learn firsthand about the studies Crum and her colleagues have conducted showing the benefits of a stress-is-enhancing mindset, and the practices they've developed to help us learn to view inevitably stressful life experiences in this new light.

Those who attended Eduardo Briceño's keynote presentation during the 2018 Annual International Conference on ADHD in St. Louis learned that a growing number of schools and organizations in the United States are implementing practices drawn from Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck's research on mindset. Her studies show the benefits we derive when learning to see intelligence and other abilities as malleable rather than fixed. Dweck refers to this as a growth mindset. Crum's studies show that the power of mindset not only impacts how we view our intelligence and other abilities, but also the impact that stress can have on our health, productivity, and well-being. It would come as no surprise if in the not-too-distant future, schools and organizations will be implementing practices drawn from her studies as well.

To learn more about the ReThinkStress Program, or to actually go through the program, go to https://mbl.stanford.edu/interventions/rethink-stress. You can also view an eight-item measure that Crum and her colleagues developed to assess stress mindset. To date, only one group of subjects evidenced more of a stress-is-enhancing mindset rather than a stress-is-debilitating mindset: Navy Seals.

To learn more about Crum's work, listen to her TED talk, *Change Your Mind, Change the Game,* and watch the video of her presentation to the Gladstone Institutes in San Francisco, *Gladstone Rethinks Stress with Mindset Expert Alia Crum*. Some of her studies are also presented below.

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